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Citation for published version:

Lacatus, C 2019, 'Populism and the 2016 American election: Evidence from official press releases and Twitter', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 223-228.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909651800183X>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1017/S104909651800183X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909651800183X)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

PS: Political Science & Politics

Publisher Rights Statement:

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**Populism and the 2016 American election:
Evidence from official press releases and Twitter**

Populism is a widely used label for a diverse group of political parties and movements around the world. Researchers have applied it equally in political analyses of the far-right politics in Western and Eastern Europe, leftist movements in Latin America, and movements like the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street in North America. Commentators have used it extensively to describe recent events, from the Brexit referendum to the victories of far-right parties in Poland and Hungary and the popularity of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the recent election.

Electoral campaigns are fertile grounds for the promotion of populist ideas and, the American election of 2016 is no exception. In this context, Donald Trump has been labelled 'the populist par excellence' (Oliver and Rahn 2016). Comparative analyses of announcement speeches during the electoral campaign show that Sanders has relied more on a critique of economic elites, while Trump has used simple rhetoric of anti-elitism, nativism and economic insecurity to make a strong populist claim to the presidency (Oliver and Rahn 2016). By addressing the economic and cultural concerns of the white working class and their declining societal position, the political rhetoric Trump used in his campaign speeches contributed to his success (Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017).

Rovira and Kaltwasser (2018) makes important headway in measuring populist rhetoric across the political spectrum in the 2016 campaign, through a content analysis of the campaign

speeches of main presidential candidates (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). They find that, compared to levels of populism in Greece and Venezuela, populism in the US election was moderate, with Sanders and Trump engaging in such discourse with different levels of consistency (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018).

These studies have significantly improved our understanding of how political candidates make use of populist rhetoric in their electoral campaigns. Yet, we still have much to learn about the role that different forms of formal campaign communication played in promoting populist ideas on both sides of the political spectrum in the 2016 American election.

This paper seeks to make a twofold contribution to this research agenda. First, it draws on the literature on populism as a category of rhetorical claims and proposes a typology of populist claims we expect to find in contemporary American politics. Second, it tests empirically whether this typology holds in the case of the 2016 election, by identifying specific themes that could inform populist rhetoric on both sides of the political spectrum. It offers fresh evidence from a textual analysis of official campaign communication through Twitter and press releases by the top three presidential candidates – Hilary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump.

What is Populism?

Scholars across the social sciences have engaged in debate regarding the nature of populism and whether it is a form of political mobilization (Jansen 2011; Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Weyland 2001) an ideology (Mudde 2007), or a type of discursive frame (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Hawkins 2009; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Poblete 2015; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). Despite important differences separating these traditions, scholars agree on many fundamental features of populist movements.

At its core, populism is a type of political rhetoric predicated on the moral vilification of elites, who are seen as self-serving and undemocratic. Ultimately, populism proclaims the existence of a crisis caused by elites, seeking to challenge the dominant order and giving voice to the collective will (Moffitt 2015; Oliver and Rahn 2016; Pappas 2012; Rooduijn 2014). Regardless of their ideological preferences, populists promise to replace the existing corruption with a political order that puts the “people” back at its center and resonates with their longings and aspirations. Populists consider any claims to economic, political, or cultural privilege unfounded and a direct threat to the common wisdom of the “people” (See Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Hawkins 2009; Kazin 1995; Lee 2006; Panizza 2005; Stanley 2008; Rooduijn 2014; Taggart 2000). Mueller (2016) proposes a set of necessary conditions to ascertain whether populism exists: (1) anti-elitism that reaches beyond simple opposition to incumbent parties; (2) anti-pluralism that provides a credible justification of the ‘us-them’ distinction within a particular society; and (3) the adequate socioeconomic situation with large gaps between groups.

Right-wing populists view of the “people” is often infused with nationalism and nativism. The “people” are pure and share an identity through belonging to one nation, or “heartland” (Taggart 2000), from which minorities and immigrants are often excluded (Bonikowski 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Seen as the silent majority whose interests are overlooked in favour of arrogant economic elites, corrupt politicians and minorities (Canovan 1999), the “people” are promised a return to an imagined golden age of racial and ethnic purity, unlimited prosperity and protection from self-interested politicians.

Bonikowski and Gidron (2016) find that, in electoral campaigns, candidates who see themselves as political outsiders are more likely to rely on populist claims. They often employ a distinctive rhetorical style that is emotional, simple, direct, and often indelicate (Canovan 1999;

Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Moffitt and Tormey 2014). Their lack of decorum and predilection toward flaunting the usual rules of authenticity makes them appear authentic and different from a “typical politician.” The transgressive political style signals to their supporters a strong commitment to protect the interests of their voters, even if it requires breaking the rules (Oliver and Rahn 2016).

Historically, in the US populism is a common feature of presidential politics among both Democrats and Republicans and, in general, is a strategic tool of political challengers, particularly those who have legitimate claims to outsider status (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016). Despite discursive similarities across the political spectrum, ideology does influence the claims that populist politicians seek to advance. While recent studies have shed light on important dimensions of populism in the 2016 election, we are only beginning to understand the complex circumstances that rendered populist rhetoric appealing to American voters in the most recent election.

Drawing from the relevant literature, in Table 1 we propose a typology of attitudes that we expect contemporary Democratic and Republican politicians to advance when they make a populist claim to political leadership in contemporary US. On the left side of the ideological spectrum, populists make use of language that is hostile to the rich, financial elites, and big corporations (Plattner 2010; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2011; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). They advance an agenda inclusionary of the Main Street and opposed to Wall Street, with a progressive social justice agenda (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In general, populist politicians on the left tend to rely primarily on economic claims, while politicians on the right favor nationalist claims (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016).

Left-wing	Right-wing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Anti-corporations ✓ Against the 1% ✓ Pro-“Main Street” ✓ Progressive social justice agenda ✓ Inclusionary of immigrants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Nativist ✓ Producerist ✓ Racialized interpretation of ‘the people’ ✓ Anti-Muslim ✓ Anti-liberal elites

Table 1: Attributes of populist claims across the political spectrum in contemporary US (compiled by author, from relevant literature)

On the right side of the ideological spectrum, populist discourse is producerist and denounces out-of-control spending by government that would benefit freeloaders (Zernike 2010; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), such as immigrants or members of minority communities (Michael 2014). Providing a racialized interpretation of the people, right-wing populism is intrinsically exclusionary of cultural, religious, linguistic, and racial minorities (Plattner 2010; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Voting preferences in the 2016 have also been tied to the timing of the election, at the end Obama’s presidency. Eight years of an African American president magnified a process of racialization of politics (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2016). By 2016, political polarization had become increasingly correlated with race and racial attitudes, to the extent that the Democratic Party increasingly comprise racially liberal whites and minorities, while the Republican Party increasingly comprised people who were unfavourable toward African Americans, immigrants, and Muslims (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2016, p. 67).

The main threat for “the people” is the “liberal elites”, which works through higher education, particularly the Ivy League universities, to “pervert” the bureaucrats, judges, and politicians of the future with “un-American” ideas (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Consternation over the economy, concomitant with fears of demographic displacement due to

widespread immigration – mainly from Latin America – has stoked up the resurgence of populist attitudes on the far-right (Table 1). How does this distribution of rhetorical claims map onto the official communication of the top 2016 presidential hopefuls?

Populism in the 2016 American election

To address the above question, we propose a study of official campaign communication through Twitter and press releases. The analysis focuses on official campaign statements (www.hillaryclinton.com; www.berniesanders.com; www.donaldtrump.com) as well as tweets published on the official accounts of the three main candidates to the US election: @Hillary Clinton, @BernieSanders, @realDonaldTrump. Historical campaign statements and tweet data were collected from the three candidates' webpages and from www.twitter.com, for a period of six months (1st January – 30th June 2016). Official campaign statements are published on campaign websites. Twitter is a social networking platform that allows users to post microblogs, or brief entries ("tweets") that are no longer than 140 characters and usually contain "(...) short content such as phrases, quick comments, images, or links to videos" (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013, p.219). Since its launch in 2006, numerous politicians have made increasing use of it for campaigning purposes (see for instance Obama's use of Twitter during both presidential campaigns). In the Appendix, we provide details about the method and the coding process, including information about validity, inter-coder reliability, the coding scheme, and the frequency of codes for populist themes for each candidate.

Our justification for selecting the two means of communication is twofold. First, we seek to respond to a recent call for more research in the role that media, including social media, play in the process of vote choice (Ernst, Engesser, and Esser 2016; Groshek and Koc-Michalska

2017). The comparative perspective across the two media will allow us to notice differences and similarities in campaign discourse for mainstream media, targeted by official press statements, and social media, through Twitter. Second, we selected Twitter for the analysis of social media use, as the platform has been found to be a crucial factor for explaining Trump's political rise and victory (Galdieri, Lucas, and Sisco 2018). We seek to explore further whether Twitter, alongside press releases, has also been a medium to disseminate populist messages during the 2016 electoral race.

Broad comparative patterns

Descriptive statistics of Twitter use and the release of official campaign statements to the press via the campaign websites show clear trends in prevalence of either medium of communication for the three candidates (Table 2).

Hillary Clinton's campaign used official press releases as vehicles for presenting different aspects of her policy agenda and positioning it as a continuation of the main policies implemented by the Obama administration and in opposition to the Trump and Sanders future legislative proposals and political direction. The Clinton campaign made use of Twitter to promote messages that are very similar in nature to the ones promoted in the official statements, covering a wide range of topics and taking clear positions on a large number of issues (Tables 3-4 in Appendix). A better-known political candidate on the national political scene, the Clinton campaign chose to make relatively less quantitative use of press releases and tweets. Qualitatively, however, her campaign covers the widest spectrum of topics and issues, representing her as a candidate with extensive political and policy experience.

Table 2: Descriptive user statistics for online campaigns

Candidate	Hillary Clinton	Bernie Sanders	Donald Trump
Press releases (total) ¹	112	270	130
Tweets (as of 25 June 2016)	6,212 tweets	8,896 tweets	32,000 tweets
Twitter followers (as of 25 June 2016)	7.12 million	2.66 million	9.33 million
Average words in coded press releases	445	390	339

The Sanders campaign made significantly more use of official campaign statements, to disseminate information about Sanders's main policy positions and public campaigning efforts (Tables 3-4 in Appendix). Sanders's statements during the six months covered by this study are more than double in number and, on average, considerably longer than the ones issued by the other two candidates. By comparison to the use of lengthier press releases to communicate with the public and the media, his campaign's use of Twitter is more limited. Arguably one of the main goals of the Sanders campaign was to disseminate as much information as possible about a less well-known presidential candidate and thus they used press releases as the main medium for written communication (Table 2).

Trump's use of press releases stands in contrast with Sanders's, as the campaign issued a much lower number of statements that often contain one paragraph alone with an official acknowledgment of support from public figure. A very limited number of official press statements include detailed descriptions of policy proposals. His use of Twitter contrasts both qualitatively and quantitatively with the other two candidates' communication strategies. Trump made much more extensive use of this medium to reach out to voters and also had over 30% more followers than Hillary Clinton and close to 60% more than Sanders. Trump's tweets

¹ All press statements that are coded are linked to more than one code. Given that the Hilary Clinton campaign did not date their press releases, all press released published on the official campaign website were coded. The press releases included in this study for Sanders and Trump are the ones published during January-June 2017.

are predominantly critiques, often virulent, of other candidates and much less of a platform to promote policy positions. In other words, the minimal use of press releases allowed Trump to limit the public's access to clear and elaborate policy positions as well as strategies to implement them in the event of a successful election result. By favouring Twitter use, his campaign limited communication to short and direct statements that favour personal opinions over official policy positions and strategies.

Populist rhetoric in the 2016 presidential campaigns

The qualitative content analysis finds that the distribution of themes clusters populist discourse along the left-right axis of ideological position, with Trump's statements and tweets displaying similarities to the political discourse of the far right. Trump's discourse in the Twitter-sphere during the electoral campaign shows rhetorical elements of populist right-wing ideology (Figure 3). The nativist dimension of Trump's campaign narrative, seen as the clear need to strengthen American protectionism in the face of national security threats such as terrorism, migration, and Islam more broadly, is clear in the most prevalent themes amongst the codes with the highest frequency. While not consistently opposed to all types of immigration, Trump makes very clear his strong opposition to the integration of illegal migration. Stricter controls on migration flows, through legislation, a migration ban, and a wall along the border with Mexico, are essential components of what he considers a sound national security that safeguards against terrorism, job loss and crime.

Figure 1

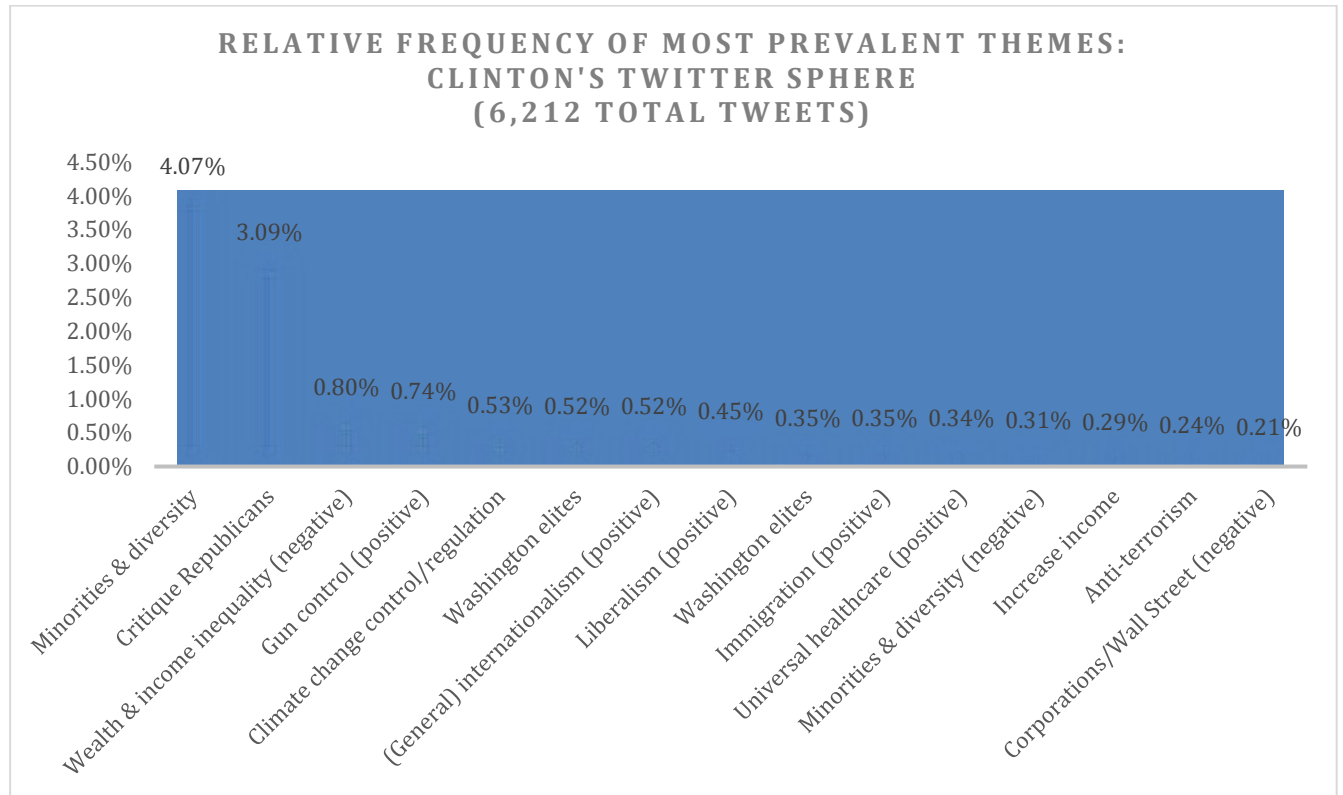


Figure 2

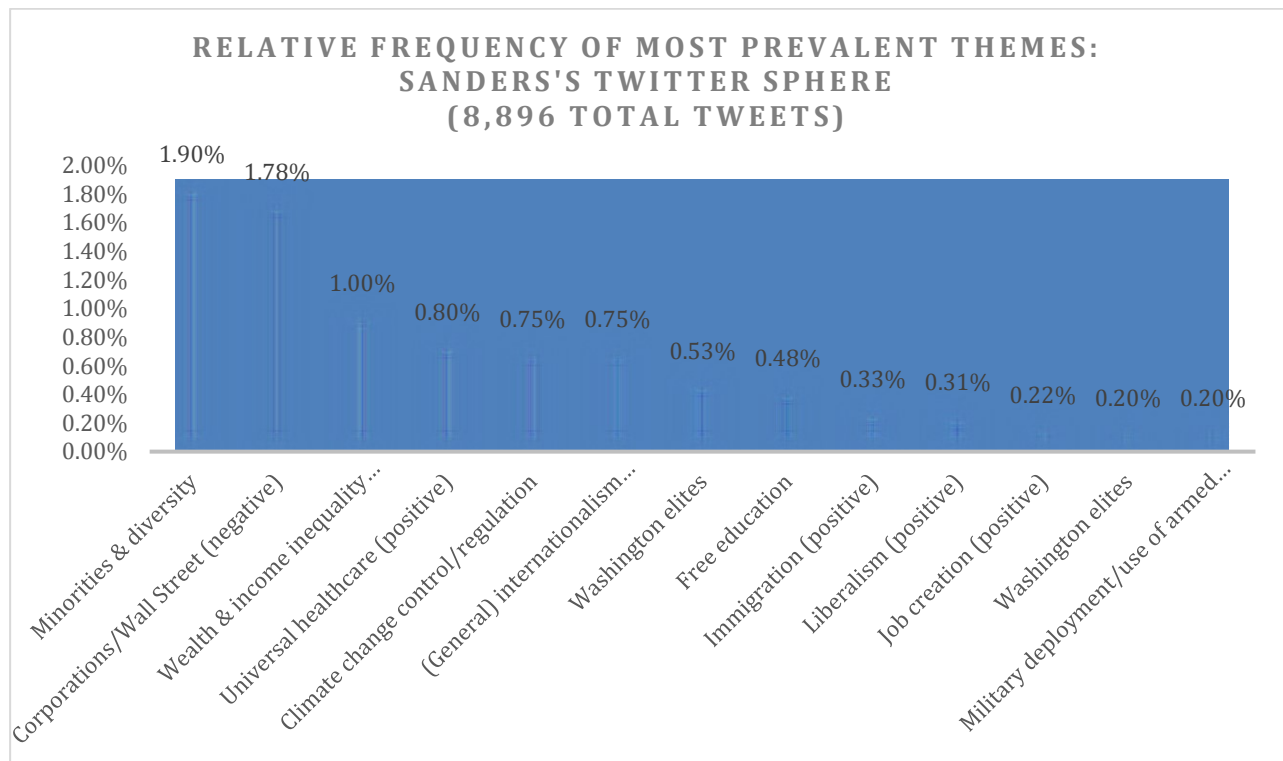
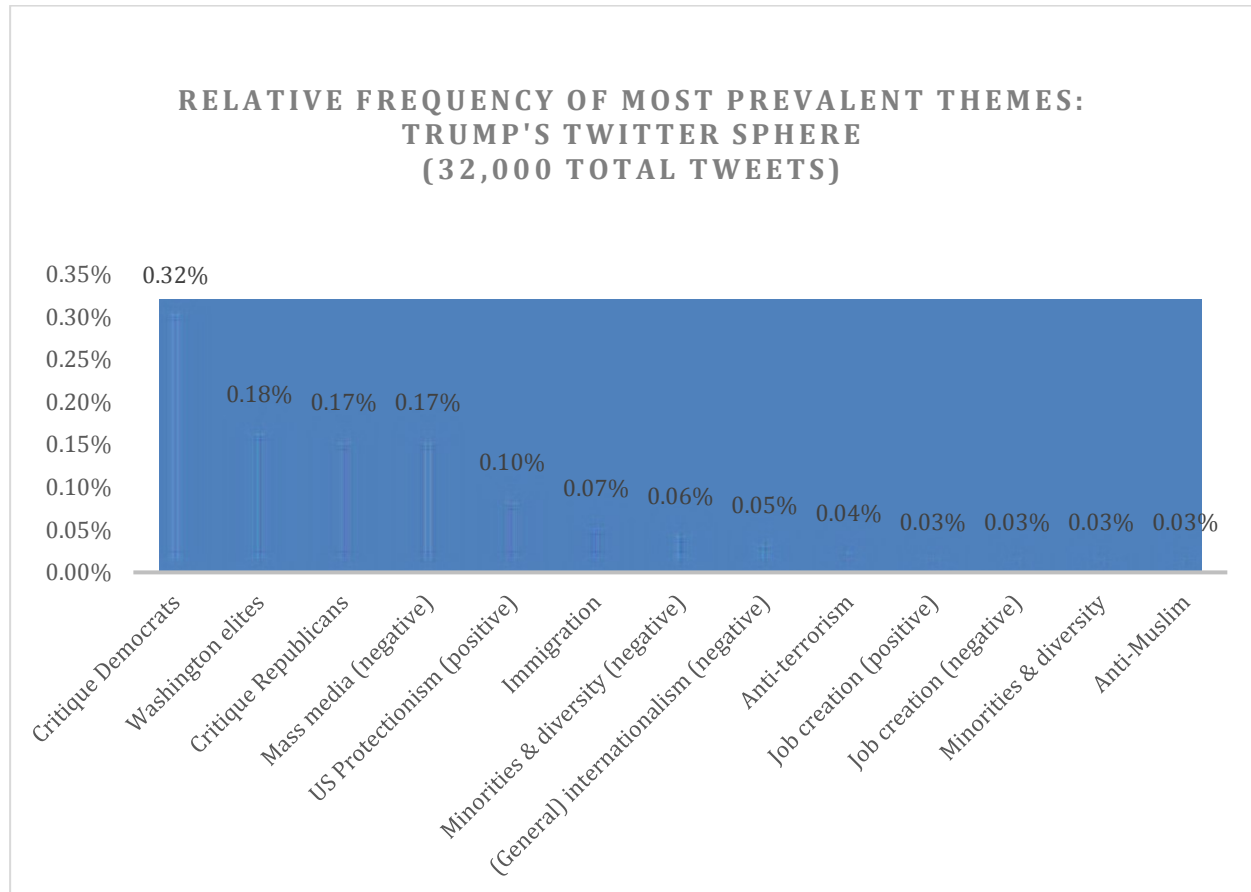


Figure 3



Another element of populism is an anti-elite discourse that builds on the opposition between ‘the pure people’ and the corrupt elites. In often aggressive and disparaging terms, Trump’s discourse is openly critical of political elites in Washington regardless of their political sympathies. By being different from political elites, he legitimises himself as a better and more reliable presidential candidate.

The areas of interest that pervade Sanders’s official campaign discourse confirm the expectations set forth by the existing scholarship on populism amongst parties on the left side of the ideological spectrum. In addition to supporting equality and integration of minorities, and promoting openness toward liberal internationalism and diplomatic cooperation, as a left-wing Democratic candidate, Sanders’s discourse is hostile to the rich, the unregulated financial sector,

big corporations, and the Washington establishment (Figure 2). Similar to Clinton's campaign (Figure 1) and broadly in line with the Democratic Party's agenda, gun control and an open domestic integration policy toward immigrants are also relevant issues in Sanders's campaign. Sanders explicitly calls for a socialist revolution and speaks on behalf of one main excluded social group, namely "the poor." They represent a broad social category whose exclusion is coordinated by Wall Street and corporations, which pursue their financial self-interest and exert significant influence over the political elites in Washington. Moreover, the poor and excluded are victims of unfair income distribution and a system that favours the rich over the poor.

While Clinton ties income and wealth inequality to differential taxation of the rich and the poor, Sanders proposes a broader narrative of exclusion that is tied to systemic deficiencies in contemporary US. Poverty and inequality, as central themes in Sanders's campaign, are best explained by the convergence of a number of social and economic factors orchestrated by Wall Street, big companies, and the Washington elites. The solutions to these problems are also structural and would require profound change in political values, leading to a dramatic social and systemic transformation. Free education and universal healthcare would allow everyone access to quality education, regardless of income, race, immigration status, or gender. On the international dimension of foreign policy, Sanders's Twitter discourse proposes the wide use of diplomatic partnership, limiting and aiming to eliminate the use of military power as a response to international conflicts and terrorism (Figure 2).

Conclusion

2016 has been called "the year of the populist" and Donald Trump, "its apotheosis" (Oliver and Rahn 2016: 190). This study provides new empirical evidence that this is indeed the case. It

offers an analysis of official campaign discourse in the official statements and tweets of the top three candidates to the US presidency in 2016 and shows that a systematic engagement with official campaign press releases and Twitter identifies the occurrence of populist discourse in the 2016 election.

All candidates promoted a populist discourse in their campaigns, with which they identified in varying degrees during the period included in this study. Trump's campaign was nativist, producerist, and critical of the political liberal elites in Washington. It promoted a racialized view of "the people" and necessarily excluded illegal migrants, Muslims, refugees, and other minorities from his electoral agenda. Sanders's campaign makes use of populist rhetoric in line with left-wing ideology. He views "the people" as poor, largely ignored by the Washington political elite and doomed to a life of inequality by the self-servient economic elite making up the richest 1% of the population. Inclusive of immigrants as well as other social, cultural and religious minorities, Sanders advances a more radical view of a socialist state that offers all its citizens free education and healthcare, eradicating poverty and inequality. Clinton makes relatively limited use of populist discourse in her campaign, and the occurrence of populist terms is largely linked to offering responses to the two counter-candidates. Instead, her campaign's agenda is inclusive of minorities, focused on the middle class, and liberal in focus, positioning itself as continuing the legacy of the Obama presidency.

We have sought to contribute to existing scholarship on populism as political discourse, by exploring the main necessary conditions for populist rhetoric and by testing them on original textual data. Although additional analysis is undoubtedly needed to understand fully the factors that contribute to the public appeal of populist discourse, our data illuminate important patterns about the use of official campaign communication to advance populist claims in the presidential campaigns of 2016 American election.

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